NY Times CIA JUN 29 1973

Truth in the Balance

By Sam Adams

WASHINGTON—Phnom Penh will one day fall. If the United States bombing stops, the end will come quickly. If the bombing goes on, the collapse will occur anyway, but some time later.

After the Communists have taken the city—whether by storm, by barter, or by default—United States intelligence will hold its post-mortem. An intelligence post-mortem usually convenes after a major event to determine what really happened and how well the analysts did beforehand in figuring it out.

Such autopsies are seldom effective. The reason is that the persons who conduct them are normally the same ones who supervised the analysis to begin with. So intelligence coroners tend to examine old arguments, find them satisfactory and declare they told you so. What the Cambodian post-mortem will find is hard to say but it will likely miss the point.

And the point is simple. The Cambodian Communists have outfought, outrecruited and outorganized the central Government. Helped at first by the Viet Cong but now on their own (except for munitions), they have gained the loyalty of more Cambodians than have the allies of the United States. But the truth is still unaccepted. It is the same truth we ignored in Vietnam in 1964, with some of the same results.

Take the size of the enemy army. For fifteen months after fighting began in earnest in Cambodia—in March 1970 when Prince Norodom Sihanouk fell—the United States Government assumed that the Communists would fail to win a local following. Therefore American intelligence neglected to examine during these months whether any Khmers had joined a Communist army. Instead it accepted on faith an old Cambodian Government guess that the native foe was a ramshackle band of from five to ten thousand. Thus Phnom Penh's conjecture became Washington's official estimate, released to the press, to Congress and to the President.

In June 1971 a draft paper of the C.I.A. suggested the enemy had raised an army while we weren't looking. The paper put its size at over 100,000 or at least ten times higher than the official estimate. Although well-documented, the finding provoked two reactions in intelligence circles. The first was disbelief that it could have happened. The second was apprehension that someone might find out. The paper was killed.

An unruly scramble began to cover up the fifteen months of neglect. The object of the scramble was to keep the number low. It was decided almost at once, for example, that certain categories included in the old guess (such as guerrillas) no longer applied. They were therefore struck from the lists. "Conservative" accounting techniques—like those the U.S. military used in downgrading Viet Cong strength prior to Tet 1968—were applied to gauging the size and number of Khmer units in the categories which U.S. intelligence agreed to count. Thus doctored, the official estimate crept upwards. It stands now at 50,000.

The trouble is that it defies common sense. The Government army, 200,000 strong on paper, is four times bigger. Yet Khmer Communist soldiers ring the Cambodian capital, invest half a dozen lesser cities, and hold the countryside. Surely the odds don't wash. In fact, the evidence points to a Khmer Communist army about on a par with the Government's.

Or take the strength of the Khmer Communist organization. In early 1971, U.S. intelligence did not know whether a Cambodian Communist party even existed. Its ignorance stemmed from not having looked. Then a routine inquiry discovered the party was a decade old, that many thousands of its members had trained in Hanoi, and that it had run an armed rebellion in Cambodia for two years prior to Sihanouk's fall. Although these facts struck down many of our earlier assumptions on Cambodia, we have only begun to face what they mean.

To begin with, the Khmer rebellion is older and better run than previously thought. The rebels have a traditional Communist structure, much like the Viet Cong's, with committees, chapters and cells. Ruthless, they have long since scotched internal factions, so that contrary to U.S. assertions, the rebels in fact present a united front.

A second implication is even more profound. Structurally separate from Hanoi, the Cambodian Communist party is independent. The members of its Central Committee are all Cambodians, who dislike Vietnamese and resent attempts by Hanoi to dictate events on Cambodian turf. They regard themselves as Hanoi's allies, and demand what they deem their just prerogatives. One wonders what they think of Mr. Kissinger's efforts to arrange their fate in Paris.

So what are we left with? Mainly that U.S. intelligence has repeated in Cambodia the mistakes it made in Vietnam. By failing so long to examine the adversaries' native strength, we once again misread the nature of the conflict. Far from being a foreign aggression, the Cambodian struggle is now a civil war. By obscuring the problem—first by neglect, then by strategem— U.S. intelligence has only compounded it, and we are left to watch in dismay as Cambodia falls to Cambodian Communists.

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